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Welcome to Literature Circles

BACK IN 1993, when I joined with twenty great teachers to write a book about literature circles, we didn't quite know what we were getting into. We were a loose confederation of colleagues working from kindergarten through college, in city and suburban schools around Chicago. What brought us together was our excitement about the student book clubs meeting in our classrooms, which we called "literature circles."

Using a variety of different structures and procedures that matched our grade levels, we'd been dazzled by what the kids could do when given choices, time, responsibility, a little guidance, and a workable structure. Our students were reading lots of good books, thinking deeply about them, writing notes and journal entries, and joining in lively, informed literature discussions. They shared responses with peers, listened respectfully to one another, sometimes disagreed vehemently, but dug back into the text to settle arguments or validate different interpretations. In short, our kids were acting like real readers, lifelong readers. Oh, sure, there were problems, too: kids who didn't do the reading, off-task discussions, and really noisy rooms. But mostly, it was working. And our group of colleagues was really excited. Literature circles were a pretty nifty little invention that we had created all by ourselves, right here in the rarefied climate of Chicago. Of course, we soon found out that we were not alone at all. All across the country, we had plenty of unmet company, teachers and kids who were inventing and reinventing literature circles of their own.

Today, things have really changed. The world has changed, schools have changed, and literature circles have changed. What used to be a quiet, home-grown activity in a few scattered classrooms has become a trend, a boom, almost a fad. Now tens of thousands of teachers are doing something they call "literature circles." And many other teachers are using classroom activities that look very much the same, which they call "book clubs" or "reading groups." This means that now literally *millions* of students are involved in some kind of small, peer-led reading discussion group.

Over this period of phenomenal growth, the basic definition of LCs has stayed the same, at least for us. Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-assigned portion of the text (either in or outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. Each group follows a reading and meeting schedule, holding periodic discussions on the way through the book. When they finish a book, the circle members may share highlights of their reading with the wider community; then they trade members with other finishing groups, select more reading, and move into a new cycle.

Members of our teacher team have been able to visit, work in, and steal ideas from hundreds of classrooms around the country where creative teachers are pioneering personalized versions of book clubs. Over the web, we hear from teachers in Australia, Asia, and all corners of Europe who are developing and enjoying some form of literature circles in their classrooms. We were amazed and warmed when we recently received this e-mail from a Chinese educator:

I'm sure it will be hard to open students' mouths back in China because it has been five thousand years that we have been taught to respect experts' opinions and accept them with no doubt. But I'm confident that literature circles will finally make a difference in teaching reading because it represents the nature of literary works, which is life itself. . . .

I wish my brave idea will someday come true in China.

—*Bingbing Fan*

Along with all this fast-spreading popularity have come some wonderful new resources, many improved insights, countless inspiring stories—and some worrisome problems, too.

So that's what this revised edition is for: to share what we have learned from ten years of doing literature circles. Among the questions I want to address are, What do we know about literature circles that we didn't understand eight or ten years ago? What new resources and procedures can help teachers organize their classroom book clubs better? What are the most common pitfalls, potholes, and stumbling blocks to successful kid-led discussion groups? Beyond the basics, what do mature or "advanced" literature circles look like? And what just plain errors did I make in the first edition of the book? There's plenty to say in each of these categories.

The core of the book is still a comprehensive and practical description of literature circles: what they are, where they came from, how they operate, what they mean for young readers, and how teachers can integrate them into the broader literacy program, K–12. All these topics have been revised and updated to reflect a decade of practice, problem solving, and refinement.

But there is also lots of new material here, which explains why the book is a bit thicker than the previous incarnation. Among the added ingredients:

New, more effective activities for preparing students.
A major reconsideration of role sheets with new guidelines for their use.
Descriptions of “second-generation” literature circles in various grade levels.
Dozens of variations on the basic version of student-led book clubs.
More models and procedures for primary grades.
A visit to a whole-school literature circle program.
Key strategies for ensuring deep and sustained discussion.
An inventory of common management problems and solutions.
New scheduling patterns for group meetings and reading time.
Sample mini-lessons for literature circle sessions.
New materials for assessing and grading literature circles.
Ideas for using literature circles with nonfiction across the curriculum.
Plans for starting and sustaining a teachers-as-readers group.
Notes on the role of parents as at-home reading models and literature circle helpers.
A review of recent professional materials and research on literature circles.
An explanation of how literature circles match the national standards for literacy education.

The Literature Circles Boom

This has been a great decade for literature circles. Over the past ten years, a host of positive conditions, both in schools and in the wider culture, have coalesced to support the rapid growth of book clubs for students. Out in the general culture, some of these supportive trends include the following:

Adult Book Clubs Are Burgeoning

Over the past decade, reading groups have become a renewed American pastime. In 1990, there were about 50,000 book clubs in the United States; by the turn of the millennium that number had just about doubled. For many of us teachers trying to bring literature circles into our schools, these adult book clubs have been our implicit model—our prototype. And what a powerful template they are. Our adult book clubs are voluntary groups of friends who meet monthly in one another’s living rooms, in church basements, or in the back rooms of bookstores. We select and read great books, books that move us, that change us as people, that create a powerful and caring community among us.

Then when we go back to our jobs as schoolteachers, we are trying to transfer the energy, the depth of thought and emotion, the lifelong commitment to books and ideas we have experienced ourselves. Whenever we run into problems translating book clubs to the school world, our own grown-up book club experience serves as our management touchstone. We can always ask ourselves first, Well, how do we deal with this problem in our own reading groups? In short, many of us who have been experimenting with literature circles are

simply trying to import a powerful, beautiful, naturally occurring literacy structure called “book clubs” into the public schools—without messing them up.

Publishers’ Support

Trade book publishers have recognized and fed the book club boom, and now offer free reading group discussion guides for their major “quality” titles. Scan the cover of almost any contemporary novel and somewhere you’ll see a headline announcing “reading group guide included.” Some guides are conveniently printed right in the back of the book, while an even larger inventory is available on publishers’ websites. The Random House website, for example, lists more than 100 book club study guides, all immediately downloadable. All these discussion guides, of course, are not just a selfless service to book clubs, but a very low-cost way to promote multiple-copy sales.

The Internet Grows

The Internet has supported the book club trend in a number of ways. Most obviously, there are now countless websites where any reader from around the country can jump into a virtual book discussion at will. There are other sites that tell you step-by-step how to set up and run a book club. Even many traditional face-to-face book clubs have developed websites as a means of communicating with their members, keeping a record of their group’s work, and sharing the group’s ideas about books and about club procedures with a wider audience. The simple miracle of e-mail has unleashed a torrent of pent-up letter-writing activity throughout the country, and is a wonderful tool for talking about books. Meanwhile, websites like amazon.com and bn.com offer readers not just speedy shipping of books but information about authors, reviews by previous readers, sales information, and links to related sites. In the near future, e-books will become another part of our reading lives; we’ll be able to load chosen texts directly into a light, legible, lap-friendly reader, either through our home computer or at a kiosk in the bookstore. Whatever delivery systems may emerge, it is comforting—and perhaps slightly ironic—to note that all this technology, all this marvelous silicon and plastic and bandwidth, are merely taking us back to the basics: to stories, to good old-fashioned flesh-and-blood books.

Oprah Takes the Lead

No single person gets more credit for the book club boom than talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, who founded an on-the-air book club in 1995, recommending one book a month for her viewers and holding periodic book discussion meetings on the show. Since that time, Oprah’s Book Club has sparked the sale of tens of millions of books—and made a lasting contribution to our national literacy.

The broadcasting of book club meetings has opened a window into a world that Oprah’s audience might never have seen. These on-air discussions

usually feature a handful of lucky viewers who have written in about the book, nominating themselves for the taping, along with Oprah and the book's author (who typically keeps quiet during the first phase of the discussion). For people who have never attended a book discussion group, whose vision of book clubs harks back to reading groups in school, this could be a revelation. Instead of chalk and worksheets, there are snacks and candles and comfy chairs and—Toni Morrison! The meetings are held in Oprah's Chicago apartment, in restaurants, and other cozy locations, and they are casual, spontaneous, free-ranging. Far from being a dry, academic exercise with right answers and grades, these are informal, lively gatherings where everyone can speak their mind—but no one is forced to perform. It isn't unusual to see group members weep over a passage in a book, pass the tissues, hug one another, sit through a long silence, shout disagreements, or laugh uproariously. The sessions not only make you want to join a book club, but show you how to act when you get there: how to take turns, how to build on other people's ideas, how to use specific passages in the book to back up your interpretations, and scores of other discussion skills that are used by adults in effective book clubs.

It was back in the mid-1980s when our team in Chicago started experimenting with literature circles in our classrooms. That means a lot of years have intervened, and some significant developments in the school world have favored the spread of book clubs for kids.

Reading Instruction Has Improved

In spite of the notorious and energy-sapping “reading wars” that have pitted phonics fans against literature advocates for the past few decades, reading instruction has generally improved. Kids are reading much more good literature than they were a generation ago. Basal selections are of better quality, longer, and more authentic. In the classroom, having kids read aloud and answer factual recall questions no longer passes for good instruction. Teachers now ask kids to engage text at higher levels of thinking: drawing inferences, forming hypotheses, making judgments, and supporting conclusions about what they read. Independent reading time is sanctioned within virtually all school schedules, with activities like reading workshop, SSR (sustained silent reading) and DEAR (drop everything and read).

Indeed, this literature-centered reading-as-thinking mentality is even reflected in some state standards and assessments. Some progressive states like Michigan have mandated that children be able to “connect what they read to their own lives” and other goals harmonious not just with skill development but true lifelong reading. All these activities are a long way from the old-fashioned basal-driven, round-robin, drill-and-kill instruction of a generation ago. Even amid today's conservative educational climate, progressive practices with deep merit for children continue to spread into classrooms anyway. Indeed, though

the whole-language movement seems to have lost many recent reading battles, it may have won the war; many of its key ingredients, like book clubs for kids, are becoming established in the majority of American schools.

Children's and Young Adult Literature Is Blooming

The past decade has been a terrifically fertile one for kids' books. For the youngest readers and prereaders, countless picture books of depth and beauty have been published in recent years, led by authors like Kevin Henkes, Eric Carle, and Anthony Browne. Many of the biggest hits—like the works of Lane Smith and Jon Scieszka—have tapped the age-old formula of appealing both to children and to the adults who read the books to their kids. For older youngsters, there has been plenty to pick from. The Harry Potter series, with its challenging, lengthy, and twisty plots, has millions of young devotees. Young adult books seem to get better and better—indeed, the artistry and quality of many is indistinguishable from that of “real” adult literature. Emblematic of this new wave of sophisticated YA literature was the 2000 Newbery Medal winner, *Bud, Not Buddy*, by Christopher Paul Curtis, a novel about a homeless boy's quest for a family during the Depression, set amid rich historical details of riding the rails, hobos, jazz, and the Negro baseball leagues.

Teachers Are Reading Themselves

Right along with the boom in children's literature circles, teacher reading groups are on the upswing, too. It has always been one of the great ironies of reading instruction in America that so few teachers actually read themselves. Indeed, very few of us habitually read books—novels, biographies, history, current events—as a steady and routine part of our lives. Of course, we have a thousand excuses why we don't: our teaching lives are so overstuffed with duties, including tons of take-home work that usurps all our potential reading time. And, hey: we are also trying to have our own families and children and lives outside of school—and maybe even plunk down in front of the tube once in a while. Reading just gets squeezed out.

But now, more and more teachers are coming back to books: they are joining with colleagues in their classrooms, in the faculty lounge, or in one another's homes to read and savor great books. Sometimes they choose current adult titles, maybe an “Oprah book” or a long-neglected classic; sometimes they read professional books that can inform their classroom practice; and sometimes they choose children's titles they may someday want to use with students. In many school districts, such teacher book clubs and study groups have become an official and encouraged form of staff development, offering a more personalized and peer-driven kind of growth experience—and a refreshing change from mass lectures or cattle-call workshops. In many of our Chicago network schools, we now work to develop simultaneous book clubs of teachers,

parents, and kids—sometimes having all these groups read the same book and come together for a festival of sharing.

The National Literacy Standards Have Endorsed Lit Circles

In 1996, the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association issued the long-awaited national Standards for the English Language Arts. The standards strongly endorsed literature-based, collaborative classrooms where students take increasing responsibility for choosing, reading, and discussing books (and other texts). The document stressed the need for students to explore a wide range of books representing different cultures, periods, and regions—and to read for “personal fulfillment” as well as for information. Accompanying the NCTE/IRA standards were detailed scenarios of exemplary instruction provided by classroom teachers who were implementing the standards in their classrooms. Among these features was a detailed description of how Deb Foertsch of Champaign, Illinois, sets up and runs her fifth graders’ literature circles (Sierra-Perry 1996). For literature circles to be explicitly sanctioned by the national literacy standards, identified as one of the “best classroom practices” in the teaching of reading and writing, was certainly another boost to its professional popularity.

Literature Circles Have Developed an Abundant Professional Literature and Research Base

Accompanying the boom in the practice of literature circles has been a boom in their documentation. We are growing a robust written record. Where ten years ago the research was sketchy, we now have qualitative and quantitative research studies, teacher accounts, journal articles, graduate dissertations, videotapes, and plenty of books. Now when we say that literature circles work, we can back it up with proof. We can offer teachers a dozen different models for getting started and moving forward. We have variations, adaptations, translations. We have collections of forms, tools, and assessment rubrics that teachers around the country have devised. We have conversations and resources on the web. We can show how book clubs fit into a complete and well-balanced reading program. And, sometimes most urgently of all, we can show how literature circles can improve students’ scores on standardized tests.

The body of research on literature groups is growing quickly. Unfortunately, these studies appear under so many different names (literature studies, book clubs, literature discussion groups, literature circles, cooperative book discussion groups) and often combine so many divergent ingredients (teacher control versus student autonomy, assigned versus chosen books) that one has to read very carefully. But all sorts of evidence, support, and teacher testimonials are accumulating about literature circles.

Our own research in Chicago has linked literature circles to improving student achievement scores. Between 1995 and 1998, our Center for City Schools received a grant from the Chicago Annenberg Challenge to support the development of instruction in a group of struggling Chicago schools. Our intervention was very focused: we helped teachers implement literature circles, as part of a reading-writing workshop approach, in as many classrooms as we could. Our training involved summer institutes and school-year support, delivered by peer consultants, veteran Chicago teachers who had used these strategies in their own classrooms. Even though our consultants worked with only a fraction of each school's faculty, schoolwide results were encouraging. In reading, our schools outstripped citywide test score gains by 14 percent in third grade, 9 percent in sixth grade, and 10 percent in eighth grade. In writing, they topped citywide gains by 25 percent in third grade, 8 percent in sixth grade, and 27 percent in eighth grade. Now, there was a lot of good work going on in these schools, and it is never possible to tell exactly what treatments caused what gains. But the teachers were convinced: their literature circles were working, not just to help kids become readers but also to *prove* they are readers on the mandated measures of proficiency.

Other researchers have been finding similarly promising outcomes. A 1998 study of fourth graders by Klinger, Vaughn, and Schumm found that students in peer-led groups made greater gains than control groups in reading comprehension and equal gains in content knowledge after reading and discussing social studies material. This effect was confirmed through a standardized reading test, a social studies unit test, and audiotapes of group work. Interestingly, the researchers found that students' small-group talk was 65 percent academic and content-related, 25 percent procedural, and 8 percent feedback, with only 2 percent off-task.

Martinez-Roldan and López-Robertson looked at the effect of literature circles in a first-grade bilingual classroom. They found that "young bilingual children, no matter what their linguistic background, are able to have rich discussions if they have regular opportunities to engage with books." Interestingly, they found that many of the Spanish-dominant children were more eager and ready to make personal connections with stories than the English speakers, who tended to stick closer to the text on the page. The Hispanic children manifested their connections through the telling of extended stories, a style of response that the English-speaking kids rarely utilized.

Dana Grisham, of San Diego State University, has been an indefatigable recorder of emerging literature circle research. Her 1999 bibliography was a major contribution to the field, and can be found in its entirety on the literature circles website, at www.literaturecircles.com. She also organized the first panel at the American Educational Research Association to focus on literature circles. Grisham has catalogued literature circle research documenting benefits

for inner-city students (Pardo 1992), incarcerated adolescents (Hill and Van Horn 1995), “resistant” learners (Hauschildt and McMahon 1996), homeless children and children living in poverty (Hanning 1998), second-language learners (MacGillivray 1995), and English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners (Dupuy 1997). Various versions of book clubs and literature study circles have been found to increase student enjoyment of and engagement in reading (Fox and Wilkinson 1997), to expand children’s discourse opportunities (Kaufmann et al. 1997), to increase multicultural awareness (Hansen-Krening 1997), to promote other perspectives on social issues (Noll 1994), to provide social outlets for students (Alvermann 1997), and to promote gender equity (Evans, Alvermann, and Anders 1998). Other than that we don’t know much about lit circles!

Literature Circles Schoolwide: Washington Irving

Washington Irving used to be a typical Chicago school. Located in a tough neighborhood on the near west side of the city, with housing projects to the north and crumbling three-flats to the south, Irving had a long record of mediocre academic results. Although the succession of historic graduation photos hanging in the hallway showed that Irving had been a welcoming landing area for a succession of immigrant groups, only about 15 percent of its current students were achieving at national norms in reading and mathematics.

Then, in 1987, a couple of important things changed. The dilapidated three-story brick building dating from the 1890s was torn down and replaced with a bright and pleasing blond brick structure. Madeleine Maraldi, a veteran math teacher and Irving assistant principal, was named principal. And then Irving was selected as the site where Governor James Thompson would sign the state’s ambitious school reform legislation. Amid great hoopla, balloons, and media lights, the governor gazed around Irving’s spanking new multipurpose room and addressed the teachers. “We’ve built the outside,” he said. “Now it’s up to you to build the inside.”

Madeleine and her teachers took this charge seriously. A few days later, the staff gathered in a big circle, and Madeleine challenged everyone to make a new commitment to teaching the children, to put aside the blaming of families from nonmainstream cultures. “Let’s look at *us*,” she declared. “The question is, How can we teach better? What do we need to focus on, to learn, get better at?” In the searching conversation that ensued, it became clear that language arts, writing, and reading needed to be at the center of Irving’s rebirth.

Today, the number of Irving students reading at national norms has nearly tripled, and the state assessment of writing puts Irving among the top schools citywide. Now when Irving kids go on to high school (like the one where I work, a few blocks away), the teachers find them to be able readers, fluent writ-

ers, and skillful collaborators. As a result, educators come from all around the country to see how this faculty of smart and dedicated teachers has bucked the odds, growing class after class of lifelong readers and writers, in a half African American, half Hispanic school with an 85 percent poverty rate.

Obviously, any school improvement this dramatic must have many components and causes. But a central ingredient in Irving's formula for success has been literature circles. If you look at the weekly schedule posted outside every classroom, you'll see that third through eighth graders have literature circles every day of the school year, for forty minutes a day. Look in any classroom, and you'll see another indicator of the commitment to book clubs: half-size classes, with about fourteen or fifteen students each. Irving has not only scheduled its school day to include LCs, but has also honored their importance by giving teachers a more favorable situation in which to grow their book clubs. Where do the other kids go? Madeleine, a master of both budgets and scheduling, books students into a writing lab, science lab, and P.E. classes, where outstanding "special" teachers engage half-classes while the other halves meet in LCs back in their classrooms.

With five forty-minute sessions dedicated to literature circles each week, there's time for young readers to do everything. To browse, sample, and pick books; to read, alone or in groups, silently or aloud; to learn from teachers in mini-lessons before group meetings; to debrief processes and problems after book clubs; to bring in special people who can enrich their experiences with books; and to gather periodically to share and celebrate books. And the teachers have the latitude, indeed the encouragement, to invent their own variants of lit circles, for themselves and their students.

Sure, Irving is an ideal situation, with a near-perfect alignment of progressive leadership and dedicated teaching. We can grouse about how our school doesn't enjoy these advantages. But isn't it nice to see what an activity like literature circles can accomplish—indeed, what *kids* can accomplish—when it is steadily supported, fully funded, and consistently implemented, when it is continued, unswayed by fads or mandates, for ten solid years?

Problems with Literature Circles

Compared with the all these assets, strengths, and constructive trends, the problems with literature circles seem relatively minor and mostly solvable. Among the concerns I'll be addressing:

Assessment Mania

Probably the most malignant influence in education today is the testing frenzy that is misdirecting our school system from top to bottom. In the name of accountability and standards, people mostly from outside the educational

system (read: politicians) are mandating that teachers and students spend more of their time on “standardized” tests that distort instruction, mismeasure kids, reward economic advantage, and punish cultural difference. When you are working in a city school system like Chicago, where many black and Hispanic kids, for several dozen perfectly understandable reasons, consistently score in the bottom half, bottom quartile, bottom decile of these discriminatory and meaningless tests, it can get pretty discouraging. When you see students in the lowest-scoring schools spending months, repeat months, studying test-coaching booklets and filling out sample tests instead of actually reading anything, you realize that the tests have *literally* become the curriculum. For the schools with the lowest test scores, the test results ensure that the kids will never get what they need, which is books, experiences, conversations, ideas, interaction, and learning.

So how does this testing mania affect literature circles and similar progressive, student-centered classroom practices? At the most superficial level it increases pressure to grade everything. Indeed, in workshops one of the most urgent and frequent questions teachers ask is, How can I get a grade out of this? The testing fad puts extra pressure on any innovation to “prove” its value, to justify any expenditure of time other than straight test coaching. As we noted earlier, there’s good news on this front; research has been accumulating that literature circles do work, and that literature-based reading programs are best for kids.

On a wider scale, excessive testing threatens all our time allocations. It’s hard to defend the big chunks of time that good activities like lit circles require when test coaching seems more relevant to test outcomes. While we may know that kids who join literature circles over extended periods of time will acquire vocabulary, build concepts, practice inferring, and develop a dozen other key reading skills, the effects are indirect. Book clubs look like the long way around to higher scores. They don’t look quite as practical as opening a practice test and blackening some circles.

Terminology Drift

In education, we have a recurrent problem that might be called “terminology drift.” Here’s what happens. First, a new pedagogical practice—take “writing workshop,” for example—is invented, described, and introduced to the profession. There are originators, there are definitions, there is literature specifically describing the practice. In “writing workshop” the innovation was outlined back in the 1980s by authors like Nancie Atwell, Don Graves, and Lucy Calkins. They identified the key, defining features of a workshop: student choice of topics, a big chunk of writing practice time, teacher as mentor and coach, a process approach featuring formative conferences, using peers as editors and collaborators, helping kids develop a portfolio of ongoing work, and so forth.

Then the idea of “writing workshop” starts to spread around the country. It gets popular. The term “writing workshop” just trips off the tongue. It sounds good, current, with-it. Suddenly, there are teachers who call it “writing workshop” when they assign kids to write a five-paragraph theme on the color symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter* or a story titled “How It Would Feel to Be a Butterfly.” All the essential, defining ingredients of true writing workshop—student choice and responsibility, teacher mentoring—are absent; the only ingredient of writing workshop that’s present is the name.

Now, I’m not saying that the above writing assignments are evil, wicked, sinful, or even wrong. But they are *not writing workshop*. And the same thing has happened to literature circles, big time. Today, it seems that any time you gather a group of students together for any activity involving reading, you can go right ahead and call it a literature circle. It doesn’t matter if the teacher has picked the story, if the book is a basal (or a science textbook!), if the teacher is running the discussion, if the kids have no voice—it’s just cool to call it a literature circle. There are even traditional round-robin reading groups being called literature circles, even though this activity is about as antithetical to the lit circle idea as you could imagine.

This is dangerous territory for me as a proponent of literature circles. I don’t want to be a purist. I don’t want to beat on anyone. I’m acutely aware that when you advocate a particular innovation, there’s a dangerous tendency to get stuck on your own original model. I once saw a Very Famous Educational Author fall into this trap at a professional conference, and it was not a pretty sight. He looked out at a packed ballroom of adoring teacher-acolytes, with overflow participants sitting on the floor, standing against the walls, and clustered around the six propped-open doors. “As I have traveled around the country visiting so many of your classrooms,” he intoned, “I have been saddened to see that so many of you are *doing it wrong*.” There was a stunned silence and a bowing of heads. A pall settled over the room as teachers silently scourged themselves for squandering the gift. Observing from the very back of the room, I started to wonder whether these 1,500 shamed disciples were really the problem. Maybe if an impartial visitor (like me) visited some of their classrooms, he’d think that their adaptations of the Great Man’s strategy were just terrific. Maybe the guru was having trouble letting go of his baby, of allowing the second wave of his idea to happen.

I have tried to keep this lesson with me as I become more and more identified as the lit circle guy. I try to remember to count to ten when I see the advertisement for another thirty-dollar compendium of handy-dandy role sheets. I bite my tongue during the workshop on “Infusing Punctuation Skills into Literature Circles.” But while letting everyone have their own meritorious adaptations and second-generation versions, I’m also going to oppose severe terminology drift. If people don’t know what the thing really is, they can never

try the real thing. And if they think the things they have always done are really the same as the latest thing, what's the reason to experiment and change? In the following chapter I will again define, with even more care than the first time, exactly what a literature circle is and what it is not.

The Joy and Jeopardy of Role Sheets

Among the most popular features of the first edition were some little handouts called "role sheets" (see pages 107–132). These simple tools, adapted from standard collaborative-learning practice, gave book club members temporary jobs like "connector," "questioner," and "literary luminary." I know these role sheets have been popular because they have been revised and republished in countless professional journals, in school district curriculum guides across the country, and in every corner of the Internet.

Back in 1993, when the first edition of this book was in manuscript, one of the outside readers predicted that the role sheets were likely to be misused and might end up stifling interaction in student groups instead of nurturing it. Even though I doubted the wisdom of the reader's foresight, I added some extra warnings to the role sheet section and then launched the book into the school world. It turned out that the reader was right: in some classrooms, the role sheets did become a hindrance, an obstacle, a drain—sometimes a virtual albatross around the neck of book club meetings. What had been designed as a temporary support device to help peer-led discussion groups get started could actually undermine the activity it was meant to support.

The rationale for role sheets still makes sense. When students are first learning to operate in peer-led discussion groups, many teachers find it helpful to offer some intermediate support structures to ease the transition. That's how we started assigning a different, rotating task to each group member—setting a cognitive purpose for the reading and an interactive one for the group discussion. Each of the roles was designed to support collaborative learning by giving kids clearly defined, interlocking, and open-ended tasks. And the sheets also enact a key assumption about reading—that readers who approach a text with clear-cut, conscious purposes will comprehend more (Keene and Zimmerman 1997). So the role sheets had two purposes: to help kids read better and discuss better.

But, glorious rationale or not, "role sheet backfire syndrome" has turned out to be disturbingly widespread. Today, as I visit schools and talk with teachers about book clubs, one of the most frequent questions I hear is, Why are my kids' book clubs so mechanical? It seems like the kids just go around the circle, reading their role sheets one after the other, and never get into a real conversation. Sometimes, I ask how long the students have been using role sheets and the answer comes back denominated in months or years. Even though the book's first edition, from which these sheets are typically photocopied, clearly

states, “The role sheets are supposed to be transitional, temporary devices” (p. 61), something tempts teachers to cling to them for way too long.

Kids are giving us the same warning about role sheets, if we will listen. Lesley Fowler’s class of fifth graders in Waterville, Maine, tried meeting both ways, with and without role sheets. Lesley conducted a survey and found that 90 percent of the kids preferred discussions without the sheets:

I think that we had better conversations without the sheets in our hands. We were able to say what we were thinking right then instead of what we wrote when we thought of it as an assignment.

We had better conversations without the sheets because it makes it seem like a play and you can’t say other things because you will get in trouble.

When you have the papers, you are too lazy to think. But without the papers you are thinking hard to know what you wrote, and then suddenly something else pops up.

I think we had better discussions without the role sheets. I think this is because it made for better conversations and it made it cooler for people to talk when we don’t have papers to stick to.

I think without, because it’s more natural, and when you finish going around the circle you keep things going with things that aren’t from the sheets.

In my opinion when we had our sheets the discussion seemed a bit dull. Now, when we used only our books the discussion seemed to flow a lot better. I think this happened because it is just like a music concert. If you are reading a sheet it sounds groggy, but if you look up it will be clear and smooth.

I think we had better conversations without our role sheets because we think of fresh ideas instead of trying to figure out what to say.

I think we had better conversations without the sheets because we made up better things as we went along. We didn’t have a script to stick to and be boring.

Interestingly, an equally large majority of kids felt it was valuable to prepare the sheets after the reading anyway—just not to use them during group meetings. As one kid put it, “I think it is good to prepare before you do the reading groups, because if you don’t have anything, then what are you going to say? I think you need to prepare then leave your papers alone and go to the reading groups. If you don’t, the discussion will go down instead of getting good.” These kids are telling us that some kind of written preparation really *does* help

them think, read, and discuss better. They are also warning us to be careful how such tools get used. In other words, the problem isn't the roles, it's the sheets.

For what it's worth, today in our own network of Chicago schools, we generally don't use the role sheets for very long, or at all. Often, we just start our literature circles using open-ended reading logs as the main tool for collecting reading responses. This switch hasn't been too hard, since these days most of our kids are already experienced lit loggers. They've used reading journals, dialogue journals, or written conversation in their reading workshop programs for years, and it's no big deal to transfer them to literature circles use. So instead of beginning with role sheets, we use a training process like the one outlined on pages 55–71, and save the roles to spice up ongoing groups later on.

Later in the book I'll try to sort all this out in detail, offering some alternatives, adjustments, and procedures. In the meantime, yes, the role sheets are still included in the book—in substantially improved form—because so many teachers find them to be constructive when used properly, either for brief initial training or as a later variation for experienced book clubs.

Learning by Doing

Oh, yes. One more thing that's happened since the first edition of this book. In 1996, four colleagues and I started a new school in Chicago. After many years of working with mostly elementary kids and teachers, I returned to my original (and uneasy) home in secondary education, to help design and open the Best Practice High School, on the city's west side. One of the key "best practices" we have been trying to explore at BPHS is—you guessed it—literature circles. Working with these very wonderful and very normal kids from all corners of Chicago has provided a great, ongoing lesson for me as the author of a teacher how-to book. In teaching BPHS kids about literature circles, I've had some transcendent classroom moments, and I've also had some days when I needed a really long nap after school. Working with our kids over weeks and months and years, I feel grounded in a new way. Now I will never underestimate what kids can do in peer-led groups, because I've seen what our students can accomplish. Neither will I underestimate the amount of effort it takes for teachers to get good literature circles up and running in classrooms. There's work involved here, for both teachers and kids. But it's good work, work worth doing, and work with very large rewards.

So where do you go from here? Depends on your past experience and your learning style, I guess. If you are already sold on literature circles, and you're ready to jump right in, you may want to skip right ahead to Chapter 5, where we "get practical" with four different training models, and carry on from there with basic strategies and advanced variations. If you need a little bit more background and explanation, continue straight ahead. In the next chapter, we will

concisely define literature circles and explain how they fit into the broader language arts program, K–12. Then, in Chapter 3, we'll share the history and origins of LCs, a surprisingly exciting tale that begins on a ship bound for the American colonies. If, on the other hand, you are someone who needs to see and hear and smell how classroom activities really work, you may want to dive into Chapter 4, where we take a “field trip” to three very different state-of-the-art literature circle classrooms.

As you work your way through the book, you will encounter a variety of Variations, highlighted with a ▼. These are quick explanations of special lit circle adaptations or refinements developed by teachers around the country.

You may also want to view sections of the videotape *Looking into Literature Circles*, which was designed to accompany this book. Because genuine student-led book clubs have subtle sights, sounds, and dynamics that no book can quite communicate, we created this video to offer glimpses into three real literature circle settings, one elementary, one secondary, and one with parents. To show you where the video may be most helpful or relevant, we'll place a television icon like this one in the margin.



And you can find company and support at www.literaturecircles.com. This is an on-line resource where teachers can gather to exchange ideas about book clubs at all grade levels and across the curriculum. Please join us to share your questions, concerns, materials, samples of kids' work, and stories of classroom crashes or triumphs.

So welcome, readers, old and new. However you read it, I hope this book works for you all, grizzled literature circle veterans and eager newbies alike. Welcome—or welcome back.